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## TENOCHTITLAN: ITS SITE IDENTIFIED

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To visitors in the City of Mexico, the guides, both official and unofficial, have been wont to declare that the modern city occupies the site of Tenochtitlan of the Aztecs, and that the Cathedral stands where, in former times, stood the heathen *teocalli*. Nor are these guides to be blamed for the inaccuracy of their statements, nor the tourists for their ready credulity in accepting them, when the generally accepted literature of the subject abounds in asseverations that Tenochtitlan covered an area nine miles in circumference ; that the site of the present city is completely swallowed up in that of the former Indian pueblo ; that the present city occupies "so exactly the same site as its predecessor that the *plaza mayor*, or great square, is the same spot which had been covered by the huge *teocalli* and the palace of Montezuma ; while the principal streets take their departure, as before, from this central point, and passing through the whole length of the city, terminate at the principal causeways" (Prescott) ; that the great causeways touch the modern capital at the same points ; and much more to the effect that the present city is inferior in extent to its predecessor, though it marks with monumental precision all the prominent sites of Tenochtitlan.

Information of this character has been heretofore most gratefully received by hurrying tourists, as sufficiently accurate for sentimental observations on the spot, and for ephemeral literary work. But among the tens of thousands who will visit the Mexican capital during the next few years, there will be many who will detect incongruities in these statements, and

to them as to archaeological students generally the exact identification of the historic site will be of more than a passing interest.

Without going into this phase of the subject more fully, it is enough now to assert that the former occupant of the ground we propose to examine, was — not a city, much less the capital of a vast territory, but precisely what we have here called it, — an Indian pueblo, by name Tenochtitlan. Begun in 1325, it had by ordinary processes expanded and developed into what it was early in the sixteenth century when first seen by European eyes. It was then entirely surrounded by the waters of Lake Texcoco, which have since so far receded as to leave the City of Mexico about seven miles from the westerly shores of the lake. The pueblo was totally destroyed by the Spanish Conquistadores in 1521, and in its place was built a Spanish colonial capital; and this capital, after passing through a series of changes during three centuries and three-quarters, has become the City of Mexico which we visit to-day with so much pleasure.

In seeking to identify the site of the ancient pueblo, the exaggerated, inaccurate, and often contradictory accounts of the Spanish Conquistadores and of the historians of the early Spanish period, together with the curious maps they drew, are more a hindrance than an aid. There comes to our assistance, however, a careful scrutiny of well-ascertained landmarks in their relation to modern topographical surveys. Most important of these landmarks for our present purposes are the three causeways which connected the island pueblo with the mainland, and which became permanent thoroughfares after the waters of the lake receded and destroyed the insular character of the site we are examining. Two of these causeways are of great historical importance. Over the southern, the Spaniards first entered the pueblo in the autumn of 1519. Over the western, they fought their way out of the pueblo the following summer, on the famous night called “Noche Triste.”

There is no question that the southern causeway, known in former times as Acachinanco, runs from the southeast corner of the main plaza, out over the succession of streets, in direct line, now known as Flamencos, Porta Coeli, Puerta de Jesus, Hospital de Jesus, Puente de Jesus, third, second, and first Rastro and Puente de San Antonio Abad; becoming at this point, where it leaves the city, the Calzada de San Antonio Abad and continuing out to Churubusco and beyond. It is a characteristic of Mexican streets, that they change their names with each block, and sometimes possess more than one name to a block.

The western causeway runs out over the streets of Tacuba, Santa Clara, San Andres, Puente de la Mariscala, San Juan de Dios (Hombres Ilustres), Portillo de San Diego, San Hipolito, Puente de Alvarado, Buena Vista, and San Cosme, and through the Tlaxpana gate to Popotla and Tacuba.

Upon the southern causeway, the site of Huitzillan, where Cortés and Moteczuma first met, is marked by the Hospital de Jesus, in the fourth block from the plaza. This was the limit of the pueblo in that direction. Upon the line of the western causeway we find marks of the three openings which played such important parts in the tragedy of Noche Triste: these are at Puente de la Mariscala, the Church of San Hipolito, and El Salto de Alvarado. The first of these marks the limits of the pueblo on the west, as any one must admit who remembers the account of the retreat of Cortés from the pueblo.

We have thus established two points upon the circumference of the ancient pueblo. Let us accept as approximately correct the statement made by a number of writers of the early Spanish period, that the intersection of the two causeways was the geographical centre of the pueblo. By describing a circle with that point for a centre, and either the site of Huitzillan or Mariscala bridge on its circumference, let us look for evidence of the pueblo's boundaries somewhere in the neighborhood of this line. The street nomenclature of the modern city here

comes to our aid. Not far from this line thus drawn on a plat of the City of Mexico, we find a score or more streets having the word *punte*, meaning 'bridge,' in their titles, signifying that in the early City of Mexico, these thoroughfares led to or crossed waterways. These Puentes are Mariscala, San Francisco, Quebrada, Monson, Aduana, S. Dimas ó Venero, Jesus, Balvanera, Fierro, Jesus Maria, Merced, Colorado, Lena, San Lazaro, Santisima, Cuervo, San Sebastian, Carmen, Leguisamo, Santo Domingo, Misericordia, Zacate, and Juan Carbonero. There are several others in the direction of Tlatelolco. To establish waterways at or near these points would be to surround the central portion of the city with water, thus giving the island we are trying to locate. If it be said that this street nomenclature refers us to a period in the history of the colonial capital long subsequent to the destruction of the Aztec pueblo, it may be replied that the area of the colonial capital expanded with each year of its history, and the only error this process of establishing the borders of the pueblo can lead to is that of making the area too large.

We find the conclusions reached by this process of reasoning strengthened by further evidences we have of the northern limits of Tenochtitlan. The pueblo was separated from Tlatelolco by an artificial watercourse. Traces still exist of a ditch several blocks north of the plaza and considerably within the circle here adopted as the basis of search for the shores of Tenochtitlan. The colonial capital, built upon the site of the ancient pueblo, was constructed by Cortés upon well-established principles regulating the laying out of Spanish colonial towns. It contained a plaza, which was to be in the centre of the town, if the town were not upon the seaboard. Fronting upon the plaza were to be the church, the court-house and *juzgado*, and the municipal offices. Choice residence sites were also found fronting the plaza. The land thus appropriated was surrounded by the *traza*, occupied in the City of Mexico by the houses of the Europeans. The *traza* was bounded by *acequias* or canals, one of which was probably on the south side of

the present plaza. Outside of the *traza* the Indians were allowed to establish their homes. If we study the growth of the colonial capital during the sixteenth century and subsequently, we find a corroboration of our conclusions regarding the extent of the pueblo, that it was a long time before the

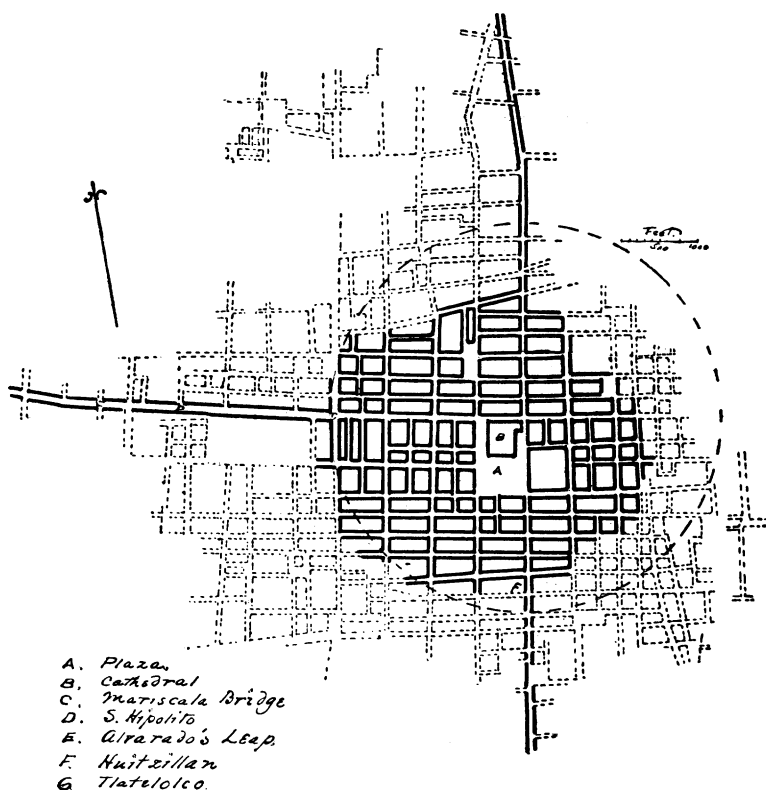


FIGURE 1. — CITY OF MEXICO AND TENOCHTITLAN.

colonial capital occupied ground outside the boundaries that we have accepted as those of Tenochtitlan.

The accompanying sketch (Fig. 1) shows the thickly settled portions of the City of Mexico; that is, the blocks of solid buildings, taking no account of scattered edifices which extend the area in every direction. Out of the thickly settled por-

tions of the city it will be seen what a small part actually occupies the site of Tenochtitlan, that part being indicated by heavy street lines. Figure 2 shows the relation of Tenochtitlan to the mainland.

While the evidence so far is insufficient for the precise identification of the site of the *teocalli*, yet it is certain that the Cathedral does not mark that site. Immediately after the conquest and the destruction of the pueblo, Cortés erected a small church upon the ruins of the *teocalli*. This was replaced

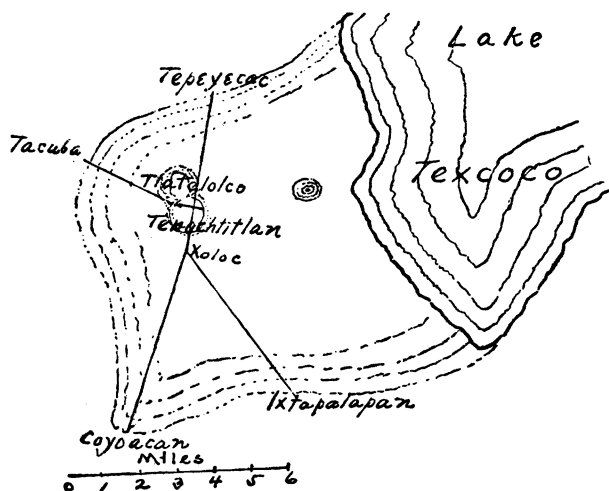


FIGURE 2. — VICINITY OF TENOCHTITLAN.

within a few years by a larger edifice. In 1573 the present Cathedral was begun. It was half a century before services could be held therein, and to provide for this contingency, it was erected just north of the old building, in order that the old building might remain until the new was ready for use. This circumstance would fix the site of the *teocalli*, did we know its dimensions or those of its surrounding *coatapanlti* or serpent-wall. Unfortunately no one gives these dimensions more accurately than he whose standard of measurement is a bowshot (Gomara). And the various attempts to fix the site have

thus far resulted in almost hopeless confusion. One of the Friar historians (Fray Diego Duran) says that one of the lodges of the idols stood where the archiepiscopal palace was erected in his day; that is, on the block east of the Cathedral. Another antiquarian (J. F. Ramirez) asserts upon the basis of manuscripts and personal observation, that the "temple" (and we suspect he means the *coatapanlli* or serpent-wall) extended from Calle Plateros to Calle Cordobanes and east to Calle Seminario, thus including the Cathedral block and that north of it (see Fig. 3). Prescott is always hopelessly confused in his topography, but he is supported by several writers in his declaration that the three causeways met in the centre of the *teocalli*. But this would involve at least three modern blocks, besides the Cathedral block, in the temple enclosure, and might not touch the main plaza at all; and would at all events place the *teocalli* east of the Cathedral, and not south of it.

Now there is a probable clue to the exact identification of the site of the *teocalli* and its surrounding serpent-wall, but that clue remains to be followed up. Very wisely has some one remarked that neither the soldiers of Cortés nor the iconoclastic Fray Zumarraga, in attempting to remove from the sight of the natives the appurtenances of their heathen worship, would have transported the heavy masses of stone far from their original places. It is significant, therefore, to locate the discovery of each of the huge monoliths preserved in the National Museum and identified as having belonged to the *teocalli* or serpent-wall. These monoliths are (1) the so-called Calendar Stone, found at a point thirty-seven *varas* north of the Portal de Flores and eighty *varas* west of the National Palace; (2) the hideous idol, — probably Huitzilopochtli, — found thirty-seven *varas* west of the National Palace and ten *varas* north of the Portal; (3) the so-called Sacrificial Stone, found near the southwest corner of the Cathedral yard; (4) the "Indio Triste" statue, found in the street bearing that name; (5) a colossal head found in the street of Santa Teresa; (6) large



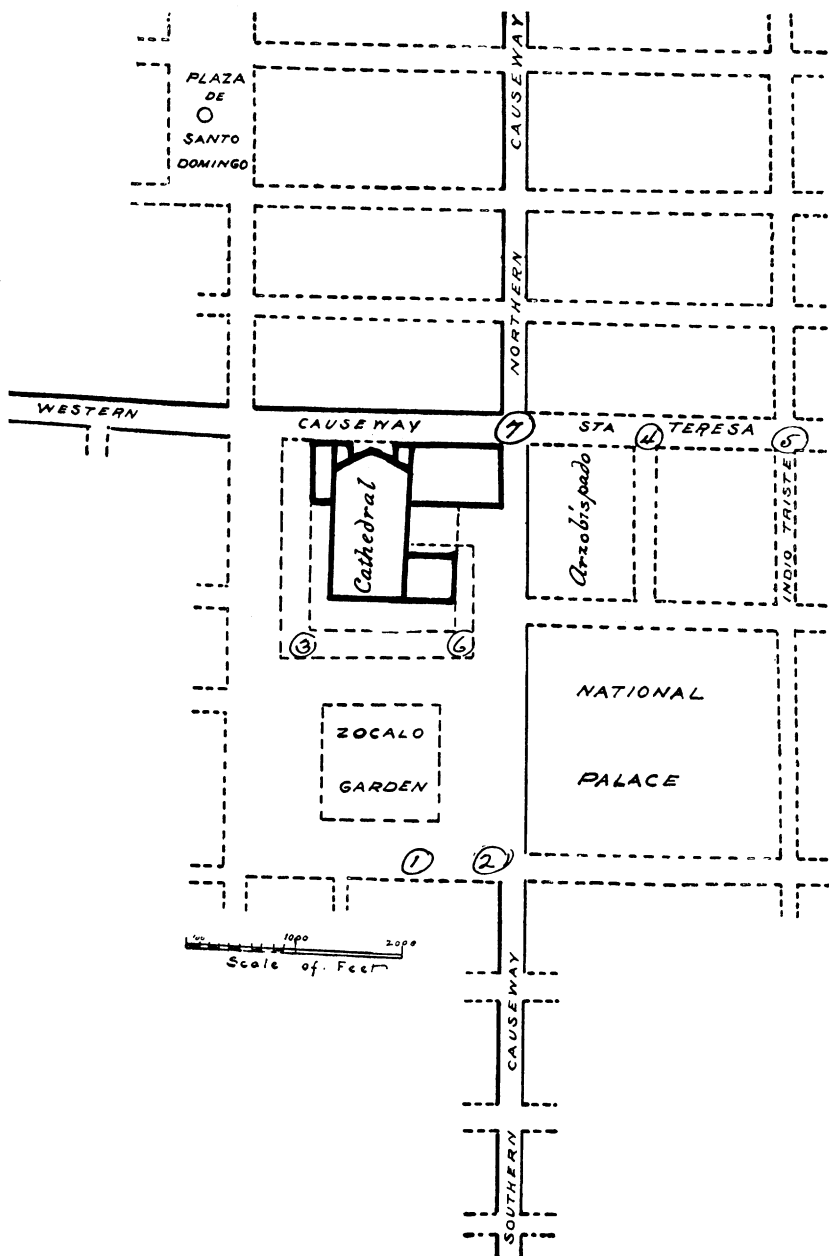


FIGURE 3.—SITE OF REMAINS OF TENOCHTITLAN.

serpents' heads found at the southeast corner of the Cathedral garden in 1881 and 1885; and (7) a monument unearthed in 1884 at the corner of Reloj and Escallerillas streets; that is to say, at the intersection of the southern and western causeways.

By a glance at the accompanying sketch (Fig. 3) it will be seen that two of these (1 and 2) were found at the southeast corner of the plaza; two (3 and 6) directly south of the Cathedral; two at least (4 and 5) a block east of the Cathedral; and one (7) at the northeast corner of the Cathedral block. This would seem to indicate that the temple enclosure was of wide extent, possibly including the greater part of the main plaza, the Cathedral, the two blocks east of the Cathedral to Indio Triste, and the National Palace. If we are still to regard the western causeway as indicating the centre of the temple, we must extend the site to include six blocks, three on each side of the northern causeway, north of the Cathedral.

Of these archaeological finds the most significant would seem to be the serpents' heads unearthed in 1881 and 1885. The present writer was so fortunate as to witness the discovery and removal of that found in 1885. It was scarcely six inches below the surface of the ground. A tree stood over it, and the removal of this tree discovered the presence of the third serpent's head similar to two discovered four years previously. The three were found to rest upon an adobe wall, and they had served as bases for the second Christian temple, that which had awaited destruction until the present Cathedral was ready for occupancy.

Were these heads originally part of the serpent-wall, and was the serpent-wall a series of serpents' heads resting upon a wall of adobe? And if so, was this the northerly, the southerly, the easterly, or the westerly wall of the temple enclosure? The answers to these questions await a thorough investigation of the spongy soil of the entire plaza and ground in the vicinity by competent scientists, who will note the exact posi-

tion of each stone found. For it is generally supposed that a score or more of similar sculptures remain buried in the atrium of the Cathedral. Perhaps these would solve the mystery in which is still enshrouded the exact position of the most prominent feature of the ancient pueblo.

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